

Art in Norman Sicily

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1981

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A symposium on art in Norman Sicily was held at Dumbarton Oaks May 1–3, 1981, under the direction of the present writer. The program was as follows:

Ernst Kitzinger Harvard University, Emeritus	Introductory Remarks
Vera von Falkenhausen University of Pisa	“The Norman Monarchy: Image and Reality”
David Abulafia University of Cambridge	“The Crown and the Economy under Roger II and His Successors”
Philip Grierson Universities of Cambridge and Brussels, Emeritus	“Taris, Ducales, and Follari: The Coinage of the Norman Kingdom”
Slobodan Ćurčić University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	“Church Architecture of Norman Sicily: The Case of St. Mary’s of the Admiral in Palermo”
Ernst Kitzinger	“Mosaic Decoration in Churches—I”
Henry Maguire University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	“Art and Literature in the Churches of Norman Sicily”
Ernst Kitzinger	“Mosaic Decorations in Churches—II”
Xavier Barral i Altet University of Paris-Sorbonne	“Les pavements en mosaïque de la période normande en Sicile”
Oleg Grabar Harvard University	“Islamic Elements in the Art of Norman Sicily”
Ihor Ševčenko Dumbarton Oaks and Harvard University	“The Madrid Manuscript of the Chronicle of Skylitzes in the Light of Its New Dating”
Ernst Kitzinger	Concluding Remarks

Of the papers that made up the program only that by David Abulafia is published—in amplified form—in the present volume. Several others are due to appear elsewhere. In still other cases the

material presented at the symposium has been or will be made available in the context of book-length studies.

Specifically, the material in Philip Grierson’s pa-

per will form the basis of the introduction to the relevant section in the volume of his forthcoming *Medieval European Coinage* dealing with central and south Italy. Slobodan Čurčić's findings concerning the architecture of the church of St. Mary of the Admiral (the "Martorana") in Palermo will form a chapter in a monograph on that church, now in preparation, though the broader aspects of his subject are to be dealt with by the author in a separate article. The monograph on St. Mary's will also accommodate the present writer's work on the mosaics of that church—the main subject of the first of his two lectures—, as well as Xavier Barral i Altel's observations on opus sectile floors insofar as they concerned St. Mary's. The present writer's second lecture was largely devoted to the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and on this subject he intends in due course to publish another article supplementing his researches of long ago (see *Art Bulletin*, 31 [1949]; *Speculum*, 28 [1953]). The first part of Henry Maguire's paper, which concerned the influence of Greek rhetoric and homiletics on mosaic decorations in Siculo-Norman churches, has been incorporated in his book *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981), while the second part of his paper, dealing with an element in the mosaics of Monreale that reflects Latin liturgical drama, is to be the subject of a separate article. Oleg Grabar intends to submit his paper either to the *Art Bulletin* or to *Muqarnas*. Finally, Ihor Ševčenko's paper is due to appear in a volume entitled *Byzanz und der Westen* to be issued by the Austrian Academy of Sciences in its series of *Sitzungsberichte*.

From a perusal of the program it will be readily apparent that no comprehensive and systematic coverage of the art of the Norman period in Sicily was attempted in this symposium. Its title, chosen with full deliberateness, was "Art in Norman Sicily", not "The Art of Norman Sicily." The principal emphasis, in fact, was on research recently done or now in progress in connection with particular monuments and objects. Chronologically, this meant a heavy—though by no means an exclusive—emphasis on the period of Roger II and more particularly on the years of that ruler's kingship (1130–54). For this period, however, the enquiry was extended beyond the boundaries of art history. The contributions of Vera von Falkenhausen and David Abulafia illuminated respectively the political and the economic preconditions on which the extraor-

dinary flowering of the arts in Sicily in the 1130s and 1140s was based.

A common theme that played a large part in the discussions of works of art was the variety of traditions—Greek, Latin, and Arabic—that came together in Norman Sicily. But it was evident also that these different traditions coexisted, commingled, and interacted in different ways, depending on the conditions and circumstances that led to the creation of a given monument or object; and it proved possible in conclusion, without doing undue violence to the individual contributions, to establish a broad typology in this respect.

One category consists of cases of what may be called random symbiosis. In these instances the coming together of elements from different traditions appears to be due to accidental circumstances. No pattern or rationale is discernible in their distribution or function. The coinage of the early decades of Roger II's reign is a case in point. Gold coinage of Arabic descent—the tari—exists side by side with a copper coinage—the follaro—whose designs derive either from Latin or from Greek traditions. Another example is the coexistence of different "manières"—Byzantine, on the one hand, Latin, on the other, with Arabic elements also present—in the miniatures of the Madrid manuscript of the Chronicle of Skylitzes as analyzed by André Grabar in an important study first published in 1971. The new palaeographic evidence according to which the Madrid codex was produced in Palermo about or soon after the middle of the twelfth century was presented by Ihor Ševčenko. The different "manières" coincide with different quires. Thus, whether the Madrid manuscript was based on an earlier illustrated edition of the Chronicle or whether its miniatures were created ad hoc, as Ševčenko tentatively proposed—in either case the manuscript bears witness to a random employment of craftsmen of different background and training in a Palermo workshop in the twelfth century. In a very different vein, a random element is implicit also in Henry Maguire's demonstration that a Greek literary influence was operative in one part of the cycle of Gospel scenes at Monreale, a Latin one in another.

The church of St. Mary, the foundation of an orthodox Greek, King Roger's Great Admiral George of Antioch, is an outstanding exponent of a different category. Here one tradition clearly predominates though elements from other traditions have been blended into it. The naos, which is of the cross-in-square type, is essentially Byzantine

and so were the two narthexes whose general shape Ćurčić has been able to reconstruct. But there are both Arabic and Romanesque elements as well. As for the mosaics, they are purely, or almost purely, Byzantine. They reflect, as does the Admiral's foundation as a whole, a new spirit of lay piety then coming to the fore in the Greek world.

By contrast, the two most important church buildings associated with Roger II himself—the Cappella Palatina and the Cathedral of Cefalù—display yet a different manner in which the different artistic traditions coexisting in Sicily at the time could be brought together. This might be described as a somewhat forcible yoking. In the case of the Palace Chapel the architecture itself, with its domed sanctuary and its basilican nave of decidedly Western lineage, exemplifies such yoking; and in the Chapel's interior decoration and fittings Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic elements are spectacularly juxtaposed. Cefalù's architecture is purely Romanesque, but is made to bear in its interior a Byzantine mosaic decoration which, magnificent as it is, appears definitely intrusive.

In this writer's view juxtapositions of this kind were effected in full consciousness that the artistic forms involved were associated with different elements in the kingdom's polyethnic society. The same mentality appears to be at work in the design of the silver coinage newly introduced by Roger II in 1140 and shown by Grierson to entail a careful balancing, on the one hand, of Byzantine and Latin features (in the *ducales*) and, on the other hand, of Arabic and Latin features (in the *third-ducales*). Certain features of the mosaic decoration of the Cappella Palatina suggest indeed a deliberate effort to build mental bridges between Christians and Muslims (and possibly Jews as well), an effort attested in a contemporary source. Thus, behind such yoking of different artistic traditions one seems to discern the mind of a government that was, in the words of Vera von Falkenhausen's introductory lecture, not only "pragmatic and efficient" but also "anxious to be Greek to the Greeks, Muslim to the Muslims, and Norman to the Normans." Determined to make an operative polity of the conglomerate of peoples, cultures, and religions which its own political and military successes had created, it set about not to level the different ethnic identities but to capitalize on their diversity.

A different view was taken by Oleg Grabar in his very stimulating paper which was devoted mainly to Roger's famous embroidered mantle (now in the Vienna Schatzkammer) and to the muqarnas ceil-

ing of the nave of the Cappella Palatina. Pointing out that both these works are without true precedents, he interpreted them as products of a new palace art keyed to Roger's kingship. "Forms were identified by their cost, their effects, their functional or other connections, at times even by the place of training of a craftsman, but not for their cultural or regional identity."

In either interpretation it was the monarchy which was the decisive factor. An understanding of its role and self-image is crucial for a correct appraisal of the entire artistic achievement of the Norman period in Sicily. This was the principal point of the writer's *Concluding Remarks*. A recapitulation of what was said on this score will conclude the present report.

The monarchy was the glue which was to hold together the conglomerate of peoples and cultures. Nowhere is this more palpably apparent than in the Cappella Palatina where the Byzantine system of mosaic images in the sanctuary was distorted and deflected for the sake of creating a "royal" view from the king's loge in the transept and where the nave was made into a kind of throne room. But bold and innovative as this proto-absolutist concept of the state was, it lacked a spiritual dimension to sustain it in the long run. This, too, is made evident in art, most clearly in comparing with the Cappella Palatina the Cathedral of Monreale, the creation of Roger's grandson William II. Monreale imitates, magnifies, enriches, and systematizes the Rogerian model, but key elements in the design of the latter's imagery are blurred and dissipated in the process. Ideologically and spiritually (though obviously not materially) Monreale reflects a state of uncertainty and exhaustion. One cannot expect to find blooming in the derivative work seeds that had not been planted in the prototype.

Limitations of the Norman artistic achievement in Sicily thus come into view. These limitations can be formulated more concretely. The entire effort rested on a very narrow basis. Nearly all the significant work was commissioned by or done for the court. The patronage lacked diversity. This constitutes a striking difference between the art of Norman Sicily and the art of any other part of the Western world during the same period. One looks in vain for the great abbots or bishops or feudal lords who independently became prominent as patrons of the arts elsewhere. As for cities and communes becoming foci of artistic endeavor—with civic consciousness and pride acting as stimuli, as they

did in so many parts of the Italian mainland during the same period—, there was no room for this in Norman Sicily either. The system of government, and in particular the tight control of commerce, did not allow for a proud and prosperous merchant class any more than for powerful barons. David Abulafia's paper illustrates the point abundantly. The contrast to Sicily's economic rivals in the North could not be greater.

This is not to say that what the Norman rulers did in the realm of art was not enormously important in a European sense. For artists and patrons from transalpine countries in particular the great

monuments created by Roger II and his successors were powerful magnets. They constituted a challenge, and served, as well, as a reservoir of themes and forms on which to draw. They also mediated at least some of the contacts with Byzantium which were so vital a factor in the art of the Northern countries in the second half of the twelfth century. The Norman artistic effort in Sicily may have lacked some vital ingredient to generate a lasting tradition on the island, but with its innate magnificence, its high standards of quality, and its wealth of forms and of content it was a beacon whose light radiated all over Europe.